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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 006587

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SUBJECT: NUCLEAR WEAPONS DEBATE PERSISTS DESPITE OFFICIAL  
DISAVOWALS

Classified By: CDA Joseph Donovan, Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Political debate over Japan's possession of nuclear weapons continues despite efforts by Prime Minister Abe to reaffirm the government's strict non-nuclear policy platform. Discussion has largely taken place in the Diet and media, with few indications that the public allergy to nuclear weapons has weakened as a result of North Korea's October 9 nuclear test. The opposition DPJ has attempted to capitalize on apparent LDP disunity on the nuclear issue. Polls suggest, however, that while the public is against the nuclear option, most do not oppose a debate about the issue. Academic specialists and political insiders say that Japan will maintain public ambiguity in its intentions but will continue to forgo the nuclear option as a policy. Some observers see ambiguity as an effective lever with China on North Korean nuclear matters. End Summary

Nuclear Debate, Non-Stop

¶2. (C) Public discussions over the nuclear question have simmered since the October 9 DPRK nuclear test. During late October Diet sessions, Minister of Foreign Affairs Taro Aso and Defense Minister Fumio Kyuma brought the debate into the cabinet by presenting apparently conflicting opinions about Japan's nuclear option. Aso stated that Japan will adhere to its three non-nuclear principles but should at least discuss the reasons why it should not go nuclear. Kyuma, on the other hand, expressed concern that such a debate might have unintended negative consequences.

¶3. (C) On November 8, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe distinguished between nuclear deterrence and nuclear armament. Abe stressed that politicians should actively discuss deterrence, which implicitly includes the U.S. nuclear umbrella, but that neither the government nor ruling party would entertain discussions about armament. Abe's latest statement on the subject was prompted by repeated calls by politicians in the ruling and opposition camp for the Prime Minister to censure LDP Policy Affairs Research Council (PARC) Chairman Hidenao Nakagawa, who has been a vocal advocate of exploring the nuclear option. Nakagawa has toned down his message in

recent days, stating that he would wait to see how events related to the post-election environment in the U.S. and Six-Party Talks play out.

¶4. (C) The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) has attempted to use apparent LDP policy discord to its advantage, most recently by demanding the resignation of FM Aso over his nuclear weapons comments. Thus far at least, the DPJ seems to be gaining little traction on the issue. While surveys continue to show strong opposition to developing nuclear weapons, media polls conducted between November 5-12 registered majorities (from 51-72 percent, depending on the poll) approving of a debate on the issue.

¶5. (C) Media commentary has generally divided along ideological lines. Editors from the conservative Sankei have voiced their desire for lively debate on the nuclear issue, insisting that PM Kishi had already declared in 1959 that possessing small nuclear arms was not unconstitutional, and that muzzling even discussion of the topic prevents Japan from becoming a normal, country. The editorial board of the Asahi Shimbun, on the other hand, has insisted that while Japan enjoys freedom of speech, a sitting Foreign Minister should proceed with extra caution on such sensitive topics. MOFA North American Affairs Deputy Director General Kazuyoshi Umemoto remarked that even the conservative media has intentionally tried to dampen debate, for example by downplaying coverage of an October 20 Washington Post column advocating a Japanese nuclear capability and avoiding the question in public polling.

Strategic Ambiguity

TOKYO 00006587 002 OF 002

¶6. (C) Takushoku University Professor Takashi Kawakami, head of the nuclear option research project commissioned by former PM Yasuhiro Nakasone, s International Institute for Policy Studies (IIPS), told the embassy that Japan will continue to maintain a level of ambiguity in its nuclear weapons rhetoric for policy reasons. In March 2007, IIPS will release an assessment that promotes this balance, although Nakasone himself has already made public reference to the ongoing nuclear review. The report, he continued, would determine that while current Japanese stocks of plutonium are sufficient to generate 4,000 nuclear warheads, Japan has no need to develop nuclear weapons because of the firm U.S. nuclear commitment to defend Japan.

¶7. (C) By keeping this issue alive, Kawakami asserted, Japanese leaders are seeking to put pressure on China to take action on North Korea's nuclear program. Chinese Embassy Defense Attache Major General Xu Jingmin told embassy Pol-Mil Chief that China's biggest concern over Pyongyang's nuclear program is its potential to push Japan to cross the nuclear threshold. While China considers Abe a pragmatist, Xu said China recognizes the intense pressure the Prime Minister is under on North Korea (and China) policy from LDP hawks, many of whom form Abe's core base of support.

U.S. Nuclear Deterrent Key

¶8. (C) Takushoku University's Kawakami said that rhetoric notwithstanding, the final determinant in Japan's nuclear debate will be U.S. security guarantees. Kawakami said that recent public assurances from the Secretary and Ambassador Schieffer following the North Korean nuclear test were critical in managing public fears. Kawakami added that these clear and succinct public statements also strengthened the hand of those within Japan trying to manage the nuclear debate.

Comment: Lots of Smoke, No Fire

19. (C) There are no indications that Japan is seriously considering the nuclear option. Nevertheless, the debate will continue to be fueled by hawks like Nakagawa and those, like Kawakami, who see deterrent value in simply publicly discussing the issue. Rather than weakening the Abe administration, the debate on whether to debate, seems to be working thus far in the government's favor, both in domestic and regional terms. The key to maintaining this balancing act will be continued public confidence in the U.S. nuclear umbrella.

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